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The digital revolution has spawned an unprecedented flood of information around the clock and around the world. Ensuring that the benefits of that abundance of information are equally shared in American society by guaranteeing access to it for all citizens is an essential first step in creating the conditions for a vibrant democracy in the 21st century.

But there is a paradox: in the task force's efforts to democratize the benefits of this revolution, broadband access also has the potential to overwhelm citizens with a tidal wave of misinformation, propaganda, spin, partisan opinion, and deceptive, unmediated messages masquerading as news. The impact could ironically?or tragically-- erode the very citizenship goals the project seeks to boost. At a minimum, the sheer volume of information flowing to citizens could create what psychologists have long warned could be a consequence of overload: numbing passivity. A recent report in the Chronicle of Higher Education by W. Russell Neuman, a professor of media technology at the University of Michigan, estimated that there are already more than 20,000 minutes (about two weeks) of unique mediated content theoretically available for every minute of every day.

At worst, the rapid technological change in the media marketplace will sow confusion among an audience ill-equipped to make key decisions. The consequences for individual and collective decision making are profound, as is the question of sustaining an audience for quality journalism in the future. The task force, however, can democratize access to the tools that will help citizens sort through this surfeit of content and make informed decisions. Just as the spread of movable type printing presses spawned a drive to educate a literate citizenry in this country in the 18th and 19th centuries, the digital revolution has created the need for a new, 21st century literacy, one that will be far more difficult to teach than ?See Spot run.?

Those very innovative tools are being created at Stony Brook University where students are learning critical thinking skills necessary to find reliable, actionable information amid the tsunami of bits and bytes that incessantly wash over us.

Three years ago, Stony Brook pioneered the first general education course in the nation in News Literacy. Unlike Media Literacy, News Literacy exclusively focuses on judging the reliability and credibility of news reports, wherever and however they originate. Already nearly 5,000 undergraduates across all academic disciplines have enrolled in the 42-hour, three-credit course. A

scientific survey of News Literacy students and a control group of students not enrolled in the course has found differences in students' ability to critically evaluate video news reports and their levels of civic engagement. Here are the course's eight outcomes:

1. Recognize the difference between journalism and other kinds of information
2. In the context of journalism, recognize the difference between news and opinion.
3. In the context of news stories, analyze the difference between assertion and verification and between evidence and inference.
4. Using analytical and critical thinking skills, demonstrate the ability to "deconstruct" news reports based on the quality of evidence presented and the reliability of sources.
5. Distinguish between news media bias and audience bias.
6. Understand the nature and mission of the American press and its relationship with the government; compare and contrast to other systems around the world.
7. Understand how the digital revolution and the structural changes in the news media can affect news consumers; understand our new responsibilities in the Digital Age as publishers and broadcasters as well as consumers.
8. Understand why news matters and why becoming a more discerning news consumer can change individual lives and the life of the country.

In 2007, the university created The Center for News Literacy (<http://www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/newsliteracy/index.html>) to export these ideas to other universities and high schools, using digital tools to rapidly scale the program. Last March, the university sponsored the first national convention on News Literacy, attended by representatives from 41 universities, including four university presidents. This January, Syracuse University became the second university to offer News Literacy as a general education course and a half dozen universities plan to begin News Literacy initiatives this year.

The Center also established a summer academy for high school teachers in 2008. Three dozen teachers from six states attended, creating curriculum materials that can be used in their classrooms. All of these activities have been supported with grants from the Knight Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the McCormick Foundation.

The challenge is to scale up dramatically this initiative using digital technology, an effort that is already underway. A collaboration of universities, including Stony Brook's News Literacy Center, and high school teachers in California are developing online curriculum materials in News and Web Literacy and online teacher training programs for multiple grade levels ranging from the 9th grade to community colleges. Without encroaching on local or state standards, this material could be made readily available to teachers and school districts across the country and could provide the human software necessary to take full advantage of the hardware the task force intends to exploit.